

The Theology and Spirituality of *Joining the Dots*

*For this soul needs to be honoured with a new dress woven
From green and blue things and arguments that cannot be
proven.*

(Patrick Kavanagh, 'Canal Bank Walk')¹

Theological Method and *Joining the Dots*

Christianity has always had to articulate what it means to live in the world as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This has manifested itself in different ways over the centuries. In his classic work *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr outlined five approaches – Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture.² *Joining the Dots* places its emphasis on the contribution of Christianity to the transformation of culture and the person. It does this through the use of conversation, or in more theological terms, through the use of 'revised critical correlation'. Let me say a word about theological correlation and then about revised theological correlation.

Theological correlation 'emphasises the importance of theology's engagement with contemporary culture'.³ This engagement can take different forms in various contexts at given times. For instance, St Paul engaged with the Athenians in a particular way when he stood in front of the council of the Areopagus:

Men of Athens, I have seen for myself how extremely scrupulous you are in all religious matters, because I noticed, as I strolled round admiring your sacred monuments, that you had an altar inscribed: 'To An Unknown God.' Well, the God whom I proclaim is in fact the one whom you already worship without knowing it. (Acts 17:23)

Paul spoke to them in a way that made use of their own images and values. He entered their world and affirmed their search for truth and for God. *Joining the Dots* seeks to do likewise. It brings the Christian tradition into conversation with the life experience of the participants; it attempts to make the wisdom of that tradition accessible and intelligible to people who work in Catholic settings.

Paul's ability to connect with the questions of others, to use their language and idiom to communicate Christian faith is central to correlational theology. The concern that theology must engage with the existential and moral questions of each generation is ongoing. In the middle of the last century, Paul Tillich sought a way for theology to offer a source of understanding that makes it possible to live meaningfully. He proposed that theologians need to pay close attention to the culture, to listen to the questions being asked and to offer a response that is both theologically authentic and understandable to that culture.

The answers implied in the event of revelation are meaningful only in so far as they are in correlation with questions concerning the whole of our existence ... Only those who have experienced the shock of transitoriness, the anxiety in which they are aware of their finitude, the threat of non-being, can understand what the notion of God means. Only those who have experienced the tragic ambiguities of our historical existence and have totally questioned the meaning of existence can understand what the symbol of God means ...⁴

Tillich sought to make Christianity understandable and relevant to people in the context of their own lives and questions. However, his correlation presumed a non-critical exchange between the gospel and culture, more of an application than a dialectical correlation.

David Tracy sought to correct this and built on the work of Tillich. For Tracy, theology ought to be at the interface of human experience and Christian truth claims. Theology is not just a resource for the questions of the day, a place where answers are to be found – it is also a partner in the conversation, and as such is open to new insights about its own identity and beliefs. Theology has learned from the lived experience of people. For instance, over the centuries

it has learned that slavery is wrong and shifted its stance on the importance of democracy; it has come to promote human rights throughout the world and appreciate the urgent need to care for the environment.

Conversation and Theology

The metaphor of conversation is helpful in understanding the dynamic that takes place when human experience and the Christian tradition are brought into contact with one another. There is a dialectical dimension to the heart of any good conversation. It is characterised by a back-and-forth movement between partners, an exchange between the 'gospel' and the culture, the culture and the 'gospel'. Within this conversation, there are three possible moments: 'one of affirming, giving assent, or accepting; a moment of questioning and possibly of refusing or negating';⁵ and a moment 'of moving one to new and transformed possibilities for both "gospel" and culture'.⁶ In such a conversation, Christian belief might affirm dimensions of the culture as being congruent with its own deepest convictions; or there may be parts of the culture that Christian faith queries or rejects as being opposed to God's reign. However, conversation moves in both directions. Consequently, where faith and life are brought into conversation, there may be aspects of Christian faith that are called into question by the conversation partners.

The poet David Whyte says that conversation is something from which we should not emerge intact. It ought to enlarge our understanding of ourselves, others and creation. David Tracy defines conversation this way:

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.⁷

Conversation and interpretation

Conversation is complex and requires real participation, far more than takes place in a chat or a casual encounter with another. When entered into as Tracy suggests, it can be transformative. However, we must realise that when we enter into conversation with others, we are all the time engaged in interpretation. All our perceptions of others are based on interpretation. We project meaning onto them, and these projected meanings, our prejudices (or our pre-judging), need to be checked out to see if they are valid, or distortions, or a bit of both. It is not possible to check them out on our own; only when our interpretations are provoked do we notice them in the first place.⁸ Only when we are 'pulled up short', only when there is a dissonance between what we believe and some new perspective, do we begin to intuit the need for further reflection. New understanding will happen at the in-between of what is familiar and what is strange. The art of good questioning can bring us there. Questions open up possibilities and engage assumptions. Allowing ourselves to ask questions or be asked questions is risky; older understandings and ways of seeing the world might be found wanting and require adjustment. This movement, this back and forth, is at the very heart of the theology of *Joining the Dots*.

When we are in conversation with someone or with a text⁹ for the first time, we find ourselves agreeing, disagreeing, surprised or confused in varying combinations and degrees of intensity. These are our initial interpretative reactions, our first impressions. To listen better and understand more fully the position of another, we must temporarily suspend concern for our own position on a particular issue. This will help us grasp the point that the other is making. Not to be equated with a facile agreement with the other's position, this is an attempt to 'build a bridge of trust and mutual respect for the subsequent negotiation of differences in interest and perspective'.¹⁰ It is only when we have come to understand the position and interest of another that the back-and-forth movement of authentic conversation may begin to unfold in a transformative manner. The challenging, confirming, negating, confusing, surprising, reassuring, disturbing, comforting dynamics of the conversation can jolt us and help reveal our presuppositions and enlarge our understanding of the issue at hand. This is part of the reason group work is important.

Participants are helped to come to know what they believe and value through the questioning and promptings of others. In recognising what they believe, they can then evaluate its trustworthiness for their lives today. Over the weeks of the programme, trust grows among participants and makes sustained, critical conversation possible.

When a conversation gets to this level, the participants must be prepared to 'submit all positions to a critical and creative suspicion, to expose and challenge systematic biases on both sides.'¹¹ This process can involve people in the four transcendental precepts proposed by Bernard Lonergan: conversation helps us tend to our experience of the data, to understand the intelligible, to judge the truth, and to be responsible for the good.¹² The bringing together of theology and experience, or faith and life, in a conversational manner is essential if faith is not to be marginalised and shrunk to fit the private dimension of our lives together. This is the aim of *Joining the Dots*.

Spirituality and *Joining the Dots*

The human search for God is as old as humanity itself. It is an ongoing, ardent enterprise, common to every culture and tradition no matter how advanced or primitive. Symbols and language may change over time, but the search goes on. It is a necessary phenomenon of human existence. Finding a critical correlation between faith and life can be a struggle. Not everyone working in Catholic schools is a committed Catholic; indeed there are those from other faith traditions and world views on their staffs. And as faith is not something static, once found kept unchanged, even those persons of committed faith will have moments of doubt, periods of wondering and adjustment.

Pope Benedict XVI suggests that the 'world of reason and the world of religious faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilisation'.¹³ Accepting the relationship between faith and reason, that deep faith and deep questioning go hand in hand, this programme seeks to open a dialogue with all those who are interested in questions of faith – those who are committed, those who are alienated, those who are indifferent, and those who are coming to consider questions of faith for the first time.

At the same time, evangelisation is and always has been the heart of the Christian mission. The task of the Christian community is to proclaim in words and deeds the Good News revealed in Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, that we are loved by God for all eternity, for God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16). The teachings of Jesus Christ and the challenges he presents make sense only in this light.

A five-week programme is a limited venture. Even so, it must attempt to present an overview of the Christian Story/Vision.¹⁴ The operative image, rather than a hierarchy of truths, is more the Celtic spiral. The Christian tradition suggests two central mysteries – two concepts which lie at the spiral core – Trinity and Incarnation. Then, in the Catholic expression of the Christian tradition, we honour the sacramental principle. It follows then that the questions at the heart of the programme include: who or what is God/what are the dominant images of God from our Judeo-Christian tradition; what does Jesus tell us about God and about ourselves; how does the Spirit of God live today and how does it relate to the human spirit/where and how do we see and relate to this triune God in everyday life? These central questions form the interlacing themes of the five weeks.

Defining 'Spirituality'

I see spirituality as central to every educator (indeed, every person), no matter who they are, where they work, or who or what they teach. It does not assume any particular religious tradition or religious faith at all, although when in positive, dynamic relationship, spirituality and religion can be mutually enriching. But it does account for the search for what is meaningful in life, and places this search within a transcendent horizon. Parker Palmer's description of spirituality as the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life resonates here.¹⁵ However, there is another dimension to spirituality. Nicholas Lash has remarked, 'My mistrust of contemporary interest in "spirituality" arises from the suspicion that quite a lot of material set out in book stores under this description sells because it does not stretch the mind or challenge our behaviour. It tends to soothe rather than subvert our well-heeled complacency.'¹⁶ Lash's comments imply that spirituality must do more than keep people within their comfort zones; it needs to push them beyond themselves towards something other than themselves.

The work of Sandra Schneiders is particularly useful in coining a working definition of spirituality appropriate to the programme. According to Schneiders, although spirituality can be both stranger and rival to religion, healthy spirituality can also be a partner with religious traditions. Spirituality and religious traditions can be partners in mutually beneficial ways. Spirituality that lacks the structural and functional resources of religious tradition is rootless and often fruitless for both the person and society; religion that is uninformed by a lived spirituality is dead and often deadly. It can become purely ideological or wither to rigid routine.

Schneiders proposes that spirituality has two distinguishing features. First, it is an *anthropological constant*. By this she means that, like personality, spirituality is a characteristic of the human person, whether one recognises it or not. Although all humans are spiritual in this basic anthropological sense, each person develops his or her spirituality in a unique and personal way (just as every person develops a unique personality). Every human person has a capacity for spirituality. However, spirituality as a developed relationality (rather than a capacity) is not universal. In other words, while everyone has the innate capacity to live a spiritual life, not everyone recognises and nurtures this capacity.

Second, for Schneiders, spirituality is a *life project or practice* involving life-integration and self-transcendence toward ultimate value. It is the capacity of persons to transcend themselves, to reach beyond themselves in relationship to others; acting on this capacity is a conscious, life-long enterprise, which brings the person beyond themselves towards what they perceive to be of ultimate value. Schneiders is quick to point out that ultimate value is objective rather than merely subjective. Thus one might perceive life itself, the health of the earth, justice for all people, or union with God as ultimate value. In summary, Schneiders defines spirituality as 'the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives'.¹⁷

Spirituality and religious tradition

Spirituality is always contextual; it takes on a different form depending on the context within which it operates. Spirituality

is often but not always contextualised by religion. For instance, spirituality in a Catholic school is embodied in the Catholic Christian tradition.

When we apply Schneiders' general definition of spirituality to the specific tradition of Christianity, we encounter a religious spirituality where the ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, in whose life we share through the gift of the Spirit in the context of the Christian community. The desired life-integration is personal transformation in Christ, which implies participation in the transformation of the world in justice for all creatures. Thus any attempt to foster Christian spirituality must have as its centre the personal lived relationship with Jesus Christ. The community is the locus for this spirituality, for it is in the community, the body of Christ, that one is to encounter the One who is Love (1 Jn 4:16).

Ignatian spirituality and *Joining the Dots*

The spiritual emphasis in *Joining the Dots* is primarily Christocentric. However, the gospels contain many emphases of Jesus – his time in the wilderness, his healing, his poverty and passion. They have all led to various kinds of spirituality and give rise to the distinctive features we find with, for example, Dominican, Franciscan and Benedictine spiritualities, to name but a few. *Joining the Dots* is rooted in Ignatian spirituality as one particularly appropriate to the world of education and educators. Grounded in Christian theology, it holds key features common to every integrative Christian spirituality; it is simply the nuance or emphasis that changes. The nature of the Ignatian charism is suited to teaching, as born out by the success of Jesuit education over a 500-year history. The substantive pedagogy and school system to which it gave rise is clearly rooted in Ignatian spirituality.

Hallmarks of Ignatian spirituality

Ignatian spirituality fits into the larger reality of human spiritual hunger. Today's 'transcendent spirituality', according to Robert J. Starratt, is characterised by 'a whole new consciousness of personal and social identity, a new sense of community' and a new social, political and ethical response to the ecological crisis.¹⁸ It resonates deeply with the native creation spiritualities and their awareness of God's presence in everything. At the same time, its solidarity

with global crises moves beyond empathy and demands a human response. This juxtaposition of belonging and response is also the hallmark (known as the Principle and Foundation – the vocation of every person to love and service) of Ignatian spirituality. Framed in this context, and with its triadic dynamic between self, God and responding in words and deeds to what is other, especially to whom and what is in need of help, it is clear that Ignatian spirituality has much to offer in the contemporary climate.

Every spirituality develops in response to the movements of a particular time, culture and set of circumstances. The story of Ignatius of Loyola, his dramatic conversion and the cultural context of his era has been told many times. It is not my intention to repeat it here. What is significant to this project is the story of his evolving spirituality. Ignatius was virtually illiterate in matters theological and spiritual when he began his spiritual journey.¹⁹ During his recovery after the fall of Pamplona, he realised that God could stir his heart to draw him in one direction, but that there was an enemy of God who was trying to draw his heart in a different and conflicting direction. Because he could not identify any reason why God would single him out, he became convinced that God was calling everyone to intimacy and service – a remarkably optimistic expectation and high anthropology. This constitutes the foundational reality, the Principle and Foundation, of Ignatian spirituality.

Finding God in all things constituted Ignatius' own inner attitude: 'He found God not only in quiet prayer; but also in the confused messiness of his daily work, with all of its problems and concerns, as well as in his ordinary conversations with others.'²⁰ Ignatius realised that God works through the ordinary events of every day; the challenge to humanity is to find God in all things, events, and circumstances of daily living,²¹ and to respond with loving service.

There is little that is new in such a positive cosmology. Ignatius' contribution was the praxis emphasis: the inclusion of attention to images, desires and feelings as sources of God's self-disclosure to the person, and the tracking of personal behaviour and attitudes which effectively reveal or blind us to God's presence and invitation in the bits and pieces of everyday life.

Ignatius developed rules for discerning the spirits and for testing what is of God and what is not. Discernment of spirits is another

hallmark of Ignatian spirituality and is directed toward interpreting one's life and the decisions to be made. Eventually he developed what he called the examen in order to recognise the movements of God's Spirit in ordinary experience. The examen, meant to be undertaken by a person twice a day, is simply a quiet moment of taking stock. Born out of a sense of gratitude for the gracious goodness of God, the person reflects on the events of the day and looks for patterns of the Spirit's movements over time. Like all Ignatian spiritual practices, it is conducted without self-praise or blame, the idea is to track how we allow God's presence into our lives and how we block or turn away from that presence through our human sinfulness.

His Basque biographer Tellechea Idígoras insists that, like John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, Ignatius was a very great mystic, although the wrapping is different. 'Before anything else, he was a man infused with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, one who listened to God all of the time.'²² In Ignatius' case however, mysticism is not withdrawal from normal activities or the isolated life. It is an awareness of God's presence in all things, which is then responded to as loving service.

Some theological features of Ignatian spirituality (as they apply to the programme)

1. Trinity

The Triune God of Christian tradition is more a reality of experience than a question to be pondered. If Trinity is a central mystery of Christian faith, then it should affect everything – how we relate to God, to others, to ourselves. It should shape our spirituality and our prayer lives. Trinity is central not only for understanding who God is but what we're invited into. Far from being disconnected from everyday spirituality, the Trinity names the activities of God that reflect God's very selfhood. To say it is a mystery should not mean that it is remote or has no relevance for our everyday lives.

The history of spiritual direction tells us that we have known God in all God's ways (i.e. three sets of operations) without putting them together in a complete, comprehensive whole. At different times we relate to God as:

- Father/Mother/Creator/Source/Origin
- Christ/Liberator/Redeemer/Healer
- Spirit/Sustainer/Sanctifier/Guide.

At any moment in time we are likely to be relating to God in one way more dominantly than the other two. When we are comfortable with three persons in one, then, when the flux of life demands, we can pray primarily to one of those over another; one more than another may become the focus of prayer. I remember when I discovered I was pregnant with my first baby feeling an overwhelming surge toward the Spirit. The line from the Nicene Creed kept flooding into my mind: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit ... the Giver of Life.' The giver of life that was still, through me, giving new life. And although one might think that God the Father-Creator would become the centre of my prayer, it was in fact a whole new sense of the Spirit, the life-giving, ongoing Spirit that took over.

Our religious experience doesn't really tell of all these three dimensions at once. Yet generations of Christians have experienced God in these patterns. Who God is within Godself and who God is in relation to us is inextricably bound – God's inner life and our participation in that life. We have come to realise that these three persons or energies are distinct, but the unity of God rests in mutual interdependence of these three persons. Of course, if we are made in the image and likeness of God, then we also are made to be interdependent, in radical relation. This is quite different to a society that favours the autonomous person whose goal is independence and self-fulfilment. Contemporary theologians such as David Tracy want us to re-grasp that who God is in relation to Godself mirrors exactly who God is in relation to us. According to Tracy, radical relationality is God's primary attribute and therefore what we are called to become. The perfection of God lies in this radical relationality – in terms of interconnections. This is very different to how we have construed perfection. Once we understand that, we can grasp that we are being invited into union with God through union with each other. Of course this is what Jesus tries to teach with the Golden Rule.

The invitation of the Trinity

According to Michael Downey, the Trinity means that 'God's face is immutably turned toward us in love, that God's presence to us is utterly reliable and constant.'²³ This presence is a force, a movement, a life pulsing toward us in love. The doctrine of the Trinity tries to put words on this mystery of God. It conceives of God as a 'dynamism of divine love' and points out that

God's very being, what it is for God *to be*, is loving, life-giving relationality. God does not just *have* a love relationship with us, God is loving relationality. There is no self-contained, divine individual residing in heaven far away from us; there is simply a dynamic movement of divine love, which *is* God.²⁴

Being created in the image and likeness of this Triune God, this loving relationality – called to live as people of God – means that we too need to be in relationships that are characterised by self-gift, mutuality and interdependence. Our imaging of God grounds the ethical demands of the Christian life. We are invited to be in communion with the world around us, to be in right relationship with others, especially those who are excluded and poor, with our very selves and with the whole cosmos – and in this way, in right relationship with God.

This demand is echoed in Jesus' own preaching of the two great commandments. In the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 22:34-40; Mk 12:28-31; Lk 10:25-28), Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment of the Mosaic code. At that time, there were two answers to this question. One was that the greatest commandment was to love God with all one's heart, soul and strength, the other to love your neighbour as yourself. In the view of the day, these were two separate commandments.²⁵ However, in the answer Jesus gave to the question, he fused them together, saying they were one and the same. According to Michael Himes, 'It is not a case of loving God and loving our neighbour; loving God is loving our neighbour; loving our neighbour is loving God. They are identical.'²⁶ That is because 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8, 16). God is 'what happens between and among us, is the foundation of the possibility of our loving one another at all.'²⁷ We are *in* God, in a loving relationship, one that

makes it possible for us to love one another and at the same time to discover the presence of God in the in-between of our relationships.

In a Trinitarian spirituality, God does not compete for the love I have for my husband, family or friends. In loving them, I am participating in the love of God. God is what holds us in relationship and moves between those in the relationship; the love 'in-between'. Further, a Trinitarian spirituality cares about the whole of life. It is not one dimension among others in a life of faith. It is concerned with our own integration and the ability of all to flourish in this life; living in accord with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to Jesus Christ.

Trinity and *Joining the Dots*

Having unpacked this mystery somewhat, the pastoral implications become clear. Most significantly, Trinity can influence (a) our ways of entry into prayer, and (b) our ways of perceiving God and what we are invited into. As a central mystery, Trinity provides the framework for *Joining the Dots*.

There is a Trinitarian circularity to the programme. The entire universe proceeds from God and returns to God; the end of the programme corresponds to the beginning. The God of the opening sequence who reaches out to Adam in Michelangelo's classic depiction is the same God in the closing moments who desires union with every educator and their community. The Spirit that breathes through the programme teaching us to pray is of course the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition. So too is the indwelling of God's ongoing presence in ourselves and in all things. The Jesus of history whose virtue, values and ethic we lift up in Week 2 is the same Christ of Faith of Week 4, present in our education communities. God as Father and Creator in Week 3 points to God as transcendent; the presence of God in all things in all events of our daily lives points to the immanent God whose presence is experienced within (Week 5). Weeks 1 to 3 proceed from God the Spirit through God the Son to God the Father; Weeks 3 to 5 proceed in reverse circularity – from God the Father through God the Son to God the Spirit. Thus Weeks 1 and 5 are pneumatological in emphasis, Weeks 2 and 4 Christological, with God the Father as the centrepiece in Week 3.

2. Incarnation

A specific Christian understanding of God can never be separated from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For Christians, being human is essentially linked to one's relationship to Jesus Christ. But who is Jesus Christ? There are many answers to this question: teacher, historical figure, the Messiah, half God, half man, a moral example, the face of God, radical Palestinian Jew. However one answers this question, most Christians at least admire him. But, theologians ask, is admiration enough? We can admire people from a distance, without their lives making any claim on ours. For instance, we can admire Aung San Suu Kyi and be unmoved by the struggle for justice of the Burmese; we can admire Mother Teresa without caring for the poor. Jesus wants more than our admiration, even more than imitation. Rather, Jesus wants us to experience his presence, to respond to his invitation of friendship. As John Shea puts it, Jesus is not a law to be obeyed or a model to be imitated, but a presence to be seized and acted upon.²⁸ He expresses this sentiment beautifully in his poem below:

Sharon's Christmas Prayer²⁹

*She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with slow solemnity
convinced every word was revelation.
She said
They were so poor
They had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home
without getting lost. The lady rode
a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
was inside the lady.
They had to stay in a stable
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lited the roof
Shepherds came and you could
pet the sheep but not feed them.*

*Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars.
The baby was God.
And she jumped in the air
whirled round, dove into the sofa
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.*

Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that something incomparably good happens to people in their encounter with Jesus Christ. They come to themselves, being resorted to inner integrity. Relationships with self and others are healed and peace becomes a real possibility. Given the profound impact of Jesus Christ in their lives, the question inevitably arises – who is he? This is a question the programme asks, challenging participants to decide for themselves – who is Jesus for them in their lives right now?

In Jesus, two natures, human and divine, have come together. Jesus was both fully human and fully divine at the same time. Since Jesus was the closest human person to God, his divinity – his intimate connection with God – allowed him to be the most human person that has ever lived. The other side of the coin is that closeness to God makes us more human. Humanity and divinity are not opposites. The closer we are to God, the more fully human and free we become. Jesus' divinity allowed him to be fully human, truly himself and radically free. If we want to know what it really means to be human, then we need to look at the life of Jesus to see what it means to be fully alive.

A central mystery of Christianity is the Incarnation but our familiarity with the story can hinder our capacity to appreciate its immensity. Many think of the Incarnation as an historical event – the result of God's love and care for humanity. God sent Jesus into the world two thousand years ago. He was truly God and truly human. He had two natures. He was the face of God to the world. He lived with integrity, doing his Father's will. He healed the sick, reached out to the poor, included women in his ministry, challenged the authorities of the day, and he performed miracles. Then, those who

plotted against him, from the beginning of his public ministry, had him put to death on a cross. He rose again from the dead, brought his followers to a hillside outside and ascended physically to heaven – the Incarnation. But that is only half the story or perhaps only the beginning. While it is true to believe that the physical body of Jesus was with us for thirty-three years, it is not true to think that that was the end of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is not only a past event. It is still ongoing today.

The ongoing Incarnation

While Jesus left the earth almost two thousand years ago, the body of Christ did not. Rather than a surname for Jesus, ‘Christ’ is a title referring to God’s anointed one present in the world today. When we use the term ‘Jesus Christ’, we are referring to two realities: the human Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, the post-resurrection presence of Jesus. This presence is often referred to as the body of Christ. It signifies three things: Jesus, the historical Palestinian Jew, the Eucharist and the community of believers. It is important to realise that the Eucharist and the community of believers are not just the body of Christ in some analogical or metaphorical way. Rather, in both of these symbols, God is really, physically present. We Christians are the body of Christ in the world today. Teresa of Avila puts it this way:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion must
look out on the world.
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.*

(St Teresa of Avila, 1515–82)

A key feature of the humanity of Jesus was his care and love for people on the margins of society. This has serious implications for how we are the Body of Christ in the world today. Jesus recognised the dignity in people who were poor, sick and sinful, a dignity that was eroded because of the culture of the day. He was able to see

people as they are and not as society so ungenerously imagined them to be. His actions revealed the love that God has for the weak, vulnerable and silenced. The relationship that Jesus had with those who were poor in his own day challenges us in our relationship with those who are forgotten, invisible and excluded today.

Centredness on Christ with an education mission

I have already outlined how the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola is one particularly suited to educators. Another reason for its suitability is its focus on Christ as a man on the move, negotiating the teachable moments as they so often arise. It is noticeable that relatively few of the Gospel stories assigned for prayerful reading in the Spiritual Exercises deal with miracles compared with those where Jesus is teaching and talking with people. Ignatius’ Jesus is primarily a teacher who engages in a very real way with the needs of the time.

The Spiritual Exercises reveal a God who teaches the spiritual seeker directly. And so Ignatius himself became a teacher (through the Spiritual Exercises) and education became the foundation ministry of his society. *Joining the Dots* makes room for a God who directly teaches – through the use of a variety of Ignatian prayer forms, through quiet reflective time and space where participants can listen to the voice of God speaking in their own hearts, and through the Shared Christian Praxis Approach,⁵⁰ which encourages each person to appropriate and decide for themselves the meaning they derive from each week.

Behind Ignatius’ medieval metaphors of crusading armies and kings lies what Paul’s epistles describe as divine mystery. This mystery is that in Christ the world is reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:19). Christ’s mission is to unite all things in himself and thereby to God (1 Th 5:9; Col 2:2; Eph 1:9-10). Every Christian is called to carry on this mission – to do his or her part in the divine project. Of course the point of the Spiritual Exercises is for the person making them to discern, at various points in life, how best they can play their part in bringing about the Kingdom. Although this theme runs through the programme, it is highlighted in a particular way in the final week. Thus the programme is Christocentric, referring both to the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith (Weeks 2 and 4 in particular), and centred on Jesus Christ with an education mission.

3. Sacramental Imagination

Deep familiarity with the revealed stories of creation (Week 3) and Incarnation allows all kinds of things to be seen as compelling disclosure of the presence of God. Participants are invited to be increasingly attentive to the 'hiddenness' in the present moment, to the nuance of what happens in the ambiguous and challenging circumstances of life. This is especially true of Week 5 where the aim is to recognise that one's spirituality affects everything, including all aspects of teaching and learning, to see that God is present and to be discovered in the bits and pieces of everyday life, and to identify practices that can support such a spirituality. It aims to link what people treasure in their lives and from their faith with the core values of the school/parish and to ascertain what it takes to embody them in an ongoing, sustained way. There is an eschatological sense to Week 5 – the kingdom is present, but not quite, not yet. In the same way, the programme is nearing completion and there is a sense of achievement, of closure, of having completed something worthwhile. But there is also a sense that it is only a step, a renewal of something ongoing and eternal. And so one of the hoped-for outcomes of the programme is that participants will want to re-commit in a communal sense to the Catholic faith life of the school and their own spiritual lives. Therefore, Week 5 is sprinkled with opportunities for participants to decide for themselves the route they will follow into the future.

One such route could be the development of a sacramental imagination. Such an imagination has the ability to notice the sacred nature of everything – that everything has the possibility or potential to disclose the divine. It is the ability 'to see', to recognise the presence of God in all things. It is the ability to move beyond a false division between what is sacred and secular – for all is in God. God is the very atmosphere in whom we 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). The growth of such an imagination will require a particular understanding of grace.

Grace

The human person is reliant on the grace of God (love of God outside of the Trinity) to be open and respond to God's sustained invitation of friendship. In actual fact, the human person is reliant on the grace of God for everything. But it is also possible to refuse grace and act in ways that are opposed to God and to life.

Too often grace has been understood as only available through religious moments in our lives, such as prayer, liturgical events or the visiting of a holy place. These practices were thought to 'fill' the person with grace so that they could withstand and endure the effort it takes to live in a secular world and participate in the public sphere. Gaillardetz puts it well when he says that there has been a strong tendency to see grace as 'something that was "injected" into an otherwise profane world'.³¹ However, this is at odds with the theology that has emerged since Vatican II. For Karl Rahner:

The world is permeated by the grace of God ... The world is constantly and ceaselessly possessed by grace from its innermost roots, from the innermost personal centre of the spiritual subject ... Whether the world gives the impression, so far as our superficial everyday experience is concerned, of being imbued with grace in this way, or whether it constantly seems to give the lie to this state of being permeated by God's grace which it has, this in no sense alters the fact that it is so.³²

Grace is everywhere, available to all, urging the 'human personality toward expansiveness and self-transcendence'.³³ Since the world is in-grace, God is just as active in our lives while we engage in the public realm (for instance teaching, writing a letter to the paper, meeting parents, speaking on the radio, posting a blog or attending a local meeting), as in the private (for instance when we pray, go to church or attend a religious event). It is not an 'either/or' situation. Rather, formal religious events ought to disclose the all-pervasive presence of God's effective love in our lives and help us through grace to respond in a cooperative manner. This is a central point and fundamental to what happens in *Joining the Dots*. The author Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* gets to the heart of it when one of her characters asks: 'Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God

in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.³⁴

The world – a place crammed with heaven

The view articulated by Walker that we ‘come to church to share God’ presupposes that God is active in our lives both inside and outside the religious sphere. It does not hold with the false separation between what is sacred and what is secular – as if they were two opposing and competing spheres. If the world is in-grace, in-God, then *all* is sacred – there is no sphere that is beyond the embrace of God’s love. But coming to experience and recognise this in a conscious and mindful way is often difficult. The American theologian Michael Himes says that since ‘God is present everywhere, you and I need to notice, accept, and celebrate that presence somewhere.’³⁵ This is the function and role of sacraments in our lives. A sacrament (including the seven ‘great communal’ sacraments) is something that seeks to disclose the presence of grace already in the world and help us to respond to this self-disclosure in appropriate ways. Experiences of people, events, places, encounters can all somehow disclose the sacred depth in life. In other words, everything and anything can be sacramental – reminding us of the constant embrace of God’s self-giving love. In her poem ‘Aurora Leigh’, Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes reference to Moses meeting God at the burning bush; realising he is on holy ground he takes off his shoes. She points to the difference a sacramental imagination can make:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude [...]*

*If a man could feel,
Not one day, in the artist’s ecstasy,
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,*

*The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,
Henceforth he would paint the globe with wings,
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
And even his very body as a man, –*

A sacramental imagination helps us notice the presence of God in the world. Too often we miss the revelatory potential of those places, events and moments that are thought too ordinary, random, unholy, conflictual or abrasive to be disclosive of God or the arena for responding to God.

At this stage, an important caveat needs to be made. While we may speak about the disclosure of God, we need to approach this area with great humility and care. We must always remember that God remains incomprehensible to us, far beyond anything we can imagine. Whatever way we think of God is only a paltry reflection of what and who God is. Great harm has been done by those who feel overly confident that they know God, know what it is that God wants for the world and what God wants them to do about it.

A sacramental imagination not only helps us to see the sacred nature of our lives; it is also concerned with action that is in keeping with the God disclosed in Jesus Christ, whose spirit is at work in the world today. ‘Seeing’ God demands a response.

Service in the world

‘All that I have and possess, you, Lord, have given me. All of it is yours, dispose of it according to your will.’³⁶ This prayer forms the conclusion of the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatian spirituality understands that the gifts we are given and develop through the opportunities of a holistic education are to be offered in service to the world and ultimately for the Kingdom. Ignatius, like Jesus, invites retreatants to respond with generous desires and generous service. Christian education is gifted with opportunities not only to help others cultivate their gifts and talents in service to the world but to allow educators themselves to put their own gifts and talents to this use. In one sense, educators have already decided what form their service will take. On the other hand, ongoing discernment of the wisdom of that decision as well as

dealing with opportunities and decisions that cross their paths is crucial.

The phrase that Ignatius used more than any other in his writings, 'helping souls', encapsulates service as the core of his spirituality – a spiritual as well as physical mandate. This is what the Spiritual Exercises are all about – discerning God's will in one's deepest desires and thus the form of one's service. Of course, if God is in all things, there is no aspect of life or human interest that is inappropriate for Christian service. The early Jesuits went where they saw the greatest needs; 'the world is our home,' said Jeronimo Nadal, one of Ignatius' closest associates. This understanding also affirms the validity of all calls in life – of which education in all its forms and facets is one.

Conclusion

No amount of curriculum innovation, standardised testing, or technological aids are sufficient to make a good school. A school or parish is only as good as its participants – children, young people, parents, auxiliary staff, leaders, and of course, educators. So much depends on the spirits of educators and therefore on what is likely to sustain their spirits. The Catholic Christian tradition is a rich resource and dynamic partner for programmes to nourish spirituality.

Fostering the spiritual lives of educators is crucial; healthy spirituality can be a sustaining force, helping them to thrive rather than simply survive in schools and parishes today. The issue is important both for the personal development of educators themselves and because their spiritual lives dynamically affect the educational life and experience of the whole community, including and perhaps especially the students they teach.

Joining the Dots is about answering educators' own desires for space to reflect on the moments that providentially fill their days. It allows access to age-old methods of discerning these moments: Scripture and tradition and habits of prayer which ask 'how does the word of God speak to me in my experience of life? Where is the Good News in the stuff of every day?' It offers the time and space to remember that even if we are tired of looking for God, God never tires looking for us.

NOTES

1. 'Canal Bank Walk' by Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, Antoinette Quinn (ed.) (London: Allen Lane, 2004).
2. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).
3. Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Francis Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 138.
4. Paul Tillich and James Luther Adams, *Political Expectations* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1981), 57.
5. Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 101.
6. Thomas H. Groome, 'Inculturation: How to Proceed in a Pastoral Context', *Concilium* (1994), 121.
7. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19.
8. Hans Georg Gadamer, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 299.
9. 'Text' here is used in its widest sense to include, for instance, a piece of art or music, a memory, a belief or an experience.
10. Michael Cowan and Bernard J. Lee, *Conversation, Risk, and Conversion: The Inner and Public Life of Small Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 85.
11. Ibid.
12. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 133.
13. Pope Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, Including the Diplomatic Corps, Politicians, Academics and Business Leaders: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI' (Westminster Hall: 2010).
14. See Chapter 4.
15. Parker Palmer, 'The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching', *Change* 29, no. 6 (1997), 14.
16. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 174.
17. Sandra Schneiders, 'Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners?', *The Santa Clara Lectures* 6, no. 2 (2000), 4.
18. Robert J. Starratt, *Historical Frameworks for Understanding Spirituality: Implications for Contemporary Education* (Boston College, 2007), 21.
19. William A. Barry and Robert G. Doherty, *Contemplatives in Action: The Jesuit Way* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 9.
20. Jose Ignacio Tellechea Idígoras, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Pilgrim Saint*, trans. Cornelius Michael Buckley SJ (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1994), 584. Of the very many biographies of Ignatius of Loyola, I use this work as my principal source. Tellechea Idígoras (1928–), likewise a Basque but

non-Jesuit, has the advantage of understanding the culture and context of the early years and formative childhood experiences of Ignatius, and also offers a critical eye to his life, work, shortcomings and inspirations.

21. *Const.*, n. 288. When referring to this bedrock of Ignatian spirituality, I will use the well-known summary phrase 'finding God in all things'.
22. Idígoras, 482.
23. Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 44–5.
24. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 54–5; italics in original.
25. Michael Himes, 'Contrasting Views of the Church's Mission', in *National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors Annual Meeting* (London: 2004).
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. See John Shea, *Stories of Faith* (Allen, Texas: T. More, 1996).
29. John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected*, 1st ed. (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1977), 68.
30. See Chapter 4.
31. Gaillardetz, 98.
32. As quoted in *ibid.*, 98–9.
33. Roger Haight, *The Experience and Language of Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 161.
34. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 176.
35. Michael J. Himes, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to Catholicism* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2004), 12.
36. Ignatius Loyola, 'The Spiritual Exercises', in *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, George E. Ganss (ed.) (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), n. 234.